We work as teacher educators in an elementary education program offering graduate and undergraduate degrees that lead to initial teacher certification. Recently, the state in which we work adopted a performance-based assessment for teacher licensure, the edTPA examination (Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity [SCALE], 2013, 2014). What makes the implementation of the edTPA in our state unique is that our state legislators and Department of Education chose to implement edTPA in a consolidated timeline with a parallel statewide adoption of the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). As a result, teacher evaluation and certification processes were revamped quickly and without time for the necessary professional development and programmatic changes required for both inservice and preservice teachers, administrators, and teacher educators.

As teacher educators working to implement program-level changes in response to edTPA, we believe that we must carefully navigate a series of tensions (Berry, 2008) that relate to preparing teachers who have the theoretical and practical undergirding necessary for teaching all learners effectively while also attending to teacher candidates’ readiness for passing their certification examination. We navigate these tensions while acknowledging that not all teacher educators embrace the edTPA as a performance assessment (see Sato, 2014, for a review of responses to the edTPA). Although researchers of teacher education have elaborated the specificities of performance assessments like the edTPA within teacher education (Chung, 2008; Cuthrell et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2001; Duckor, Castellano, Téllez, Wihardini, & Wilson, 2014; Jagla, 2013; Pecheone & Chung, 2006; Sato, 2014) and have acknowledged performance assessments of classroom teachers’ performances as an effective measurement (e.g., Barker & Conley, 2014; Porter, Youngs, & Odden, 2001), other than Proulx (2014) we have found few reports of the tensions related to implementing a mandated performance-based assessment by teacher educators who actually live and experience a new implementation. In response, we draw on Amanda Berry’s (2008) concept of tensions lived and experienced by teacher educators in order to discuss how we retooled our program in response to edTPA implementation. Specifically, in this essay, we ask these questions:

- What tensions have we experienced between our beliefs and practices in implementing edTPA at the program level?
- How can such tensions provide opportunities for growth within a teacher education program?

**Tensions as Interpretive Framework**

Berry (2008) argues that teacher educators negotiate a series of tensions in their work: telling vs. growing; confidence vs. uncertainty; action vs. intent; safety vs. challenge; valuing vs. reconstructing experience; and planning vs. responsiveness. As Berry explains, these tensions are interconnected and entangled. This concept of tensions within teacher education practice has been particularly useful for us in understanding the choices we made in addressing the edTPA implementation within our program. Although we understand these tensions are interrelated, our discussion here specifically
focuses on how we grappled with the following sets of tensions: telling and growing, confidence and uncertainty, and valuing and reconstructing experience.

Teacher educators often experience tension between telling teacher candidates what to do and how to do it and “acknowledging [their] needs and concerns and challenging them to grow” (p. 33). As teacher educators, we aim to offer teacher candidates opportunities to reflect upon and inquire into their practices. We also aim to help them experience the complexities of teaching, so that they can grow in their practices. However, a formal, performative assessment such as the edTPA makes managing the tension between telling and growing even more complicated (cf. Berry, 2008); Berry questions: “What would motivate prospective teachers to seek their own solutions to teaching problems when their formal assessment is at stake?” (p. 34). In truth, we have oftentimes found ourselves telling teacher candidates what to do and how to do it, as opposed to letting them grow through their experiences.

Another tension we encountered was that between confidence and uncertainty. Berry explains this tension as one between “making explicit the complexities and messiness of teaching and helping prospective teachers feel confident to develop as new teachers” (p. 36). She explains further that the tension between confidence and uncertainty also exists “between exposing one’s vulnerability as a teacher educator and maintaining prospective teachers’ confidence in the teacher educator as a competent leader” (p. 36). Engaging with new teaching practices or new “mandates” that impact their teaching, teacher educators often report feeling uncertain about how to proceed, which may result in teacher candidates losing confidence in teacher educators’ abilities or knowledge base. In making changes in our practices and our program in order to accommodate the edTPA examination, we confronted firsthand such tension between instilling confidence in our knowledge base about the exam and uncertainty about how to proceed because of the exam.

A third tension we encountered was that between valuing and reconstructing experience. Through their “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975), all teacher candidates bring with them experiences about teaching and classrooms. This experience, gathered through years of personal experiences in classrooms, takes on a certain “authority” with teacher candidates. This “authority of experience expresses the significance of the knowledge that individuals develop as a result of their personal experience” (Berry, 2008, p. 40, emphasis added). Such a collective of personal experiences about teaching and classrooms often becomes an obstacle in terms of helping teacher candidates envision new possibilities for classrooms and teachers. With its new ways of asking teacher candidates to engage in teaching practice, we found ourselves also caught within the tensions between valuing their personal experiences as learners and wanting them to construct new experiences about teaching, learning, and classrooms. We explore how we experienced these tensions as we made two levels of program interventions in order to address edTPA.

**Enacting Program Interventions for edTPA**

In order to address the immediate impact of edTPA on our teacher candidates, teacher education faculty collaborated to create an action plan for understanding the new mandates and for developing ways to support our current and future teacher candidates. Our action plan included providing immediate support for graduating teacher candidates, while also retooling courses, coursework, and the key assessments required for national accreditation in order to provide long-term support for enrolled teacher candidates. Fortunately, the timing was ripe, as our School of Education was in the midst of a redesign effort; this performance-based assessment was just an additional layer to consider. The only difference with this layer was
that it required quick and immediate attention to support teacher candidates.

This work was nested within a yearlong series of schoolwide professional development workshops focused on educating teacher education faculty on the edTPA examination. During these workshops, faculty members were introduced to the foundation of the edTPA examination as they unpacked their subject-specific examinations and corresponding handbooks and analyzed each task’s rubric criteria. Led by one teacher education faculty member, other faculty members were also encouraged to extend their understandings of the edTPA by reviewing a series of online modules created for the teacher candidates (see Table 1). These online modules include PowerPoint presentations, audio files, and handouts. Each module ranges from 30–70 minutes. Additionally, each module includes a quiz for candidates (as well as for faculty for professional development purposes) to self-assess their learning at the end of the experience. These modules allow candidates an effective means to either learn or review the content of the module itself. Designed for all teacher candidates in the School of Education, they are general in nature and cover the main ideas and topics of the edTPA, as opposed to being discipline specific, such as focusing on adolescent mathematics or elementary school teaching.

Table 1: Online edTPA Modules at Hunter College (Baecher, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module Number</th>
<th>Module Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Orientation to the edTPA</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Orientation to the Handbook and Rubrics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Planning for Academic Language development</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Overview of the “Context for Learning”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Addressing Teacher candidates with Special Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Addressing English Language Learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Video Clips of Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Classroom Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Partnering with Cooperating Teachers</td>
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Initial Program-wide Responses to edTPA Implementation

One of our initial courses of action was to inquire into our elementary education program’s curriculum and structure. To do so, Karen led elementary teacher education faculty in conducting a pilot inquiry project intended to: 1) examine the details of the edTPA performance-based assessment; 2) better understand the needs of our teacher candidates; and 3) identify the strengths and weaknesses of our teacher candidates in relationship to both edTPA and our own beliefs and practices about teaching literacy. Karen used the insights gained from this inquiry to do two things: 1) develop online and workshop meetings to support the teacher candidates preparing for the edTPA, and 2) collaborate with colleague Amy in revision of literacy coursework in the childhood program. The reason program faculty opted to focus on the revision of literacy coursework is because of the four performance-based tasks of the Elementary edTPA; three focus on the planning, teaching, and/or assessment of literacy. (The fourth relates to the planning, teaching, and assessment of math.) In these tasks, teacher candidates are encouraged to demonstrate their abilities to participate in the plan-teach-assess cycle (SCALE, 2013). (Please see SCALE, 2013, for an overview of the Elementary edTPA performance tasks.)

As program faculty examined the nature of these three literacy performance tasks, we also engaged with external literature that had been written about the edTPA examination in order to understand how our beliefs and practices aligned with those espoused by edTPA. Particularly we focused on Lewis and Morse’s (2013) discourse analysis of edTPA materials. They conclude that the edTPA constructs a “successful literacy teacher” as being able to: 1) teach academic language; 2) “teach literacy strategies—not requisite skills” (p. 69); and 3) “use edTPAese” (p. 73). As program faculty, we identified how these beliefs were consistent with our own beliefs and practices in preparing elementary teachers, particularly a strategy-based approach to literacy instruction. From our
vantage point, this was the least demanding area
to address in our coursework, for the instructors
of our literacy courses tend to favor an approach
to literacy instruction that focuses on techniques
and strategies for making sense of and composing
texts (e.g., using details to support one’s claims
or making inferences) over a more skills-based
approach in which reading is taught in a bottom-up
manner (e.g., focusing on learning letters and parts
of words before moving on to actual reading of
text). Together, we identified the following beliefs
we held about effective elementary teachers; they
• diversify and individualize instruction through
responsive teaching that meets the needs of all
learners;
• collect, analyze, and interpret original data
on student learning through formative and
self-assessments in order to make targeted and
strategic instructional decisions;
• demonstrate strategies that learners might
use for monitoring and self-correcting their
reading—searching for semantic, syntactic,
and visual cues; discovering new things about
text; cross-checking one cueing system against
another; and solving new words in the context
of reading (Clay, 1993, as cited in Taberski,
2000, p. 9);
• teach learners concrete decoding and
phonological skills;
• provide learners with authentic uses of literacy
within the classroom setting;
• identify the linguistic demands posed by
instructional and curricular engagements in
order to help all learners be more successful
with learning tasks.

We noted that in many ways, our beliefs about
literacy instruction were consistent with the beliefs
on literacy teaching that are embedded within
edTPA, yet we struggled with managing the balance
between preparing our teacher candidates for a test
and preparing our teacher candidates for teaching
literacy. And we felt a sense of urgency in how we
responded and supported our candidates, as many of
them entered our programs at a time before edTPA
existed. It was important that not only were the
program interventions we created in response to this
mandate intoned with our own beliefs and knowledge
about literacy teaching and learning, but also that our
beliefs and practices were aligned in our courses.
Likewise, it was important that we felt ownership
over the created program interventions and that we
were not simply modifying our program and courses
so that we could better “teach to the test.”

In managing this balance, we identified how
we were situated within a set of tensions that
teacher educators experience in their practices. We
felt overwhelmingly caught within the tension of
uncertainty and confidence. Because the edTPA
was a new examination

for faculty, too, we wanted
to project to teacher
candidates that we had a
firm grasp on what it was
asking them to do, when
in fact we did not. For
instance, we created a series
of face-to-face workshops
and hosted several drop-in sessions for teacher
candidates who were submitting and preparing their
edTPA portfolios. These support workshops and
drop-in sessions were intended to coach teacher
candidates throughout the process, adhering to the
guidelines for faculty support provided by Pearson
publishing (the publisher of edTPA).

Participating in these face-to-face workshops
was particularly difficult for Amy, who was
concerned about unintentionally giving teacher
candidates misinformation that would negatively
impact their performance on the examination.
Although she was familiar with the examination,
Amy felt uncertain about her interpretation of the
edTPAese, or the way certain concepts (such as
finding a central focus for writing) were defined
and interpreted in the examination. At the same
time, however, for the sake of candidates’ peace
of mind, she felt that she needed to present
herself as knowledgeable and confident about the
examination. Throughout the time she was helping
to support teacher candidates with preparing their

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edTPA portfolios, Amy felt herself confronting this tension between appearing knowledgeable and confident while actually feeling rather uncertain.

We also noted during these interventions how we were experiencing tension between telling and growth. While we wanted to offer teacher candidates opportunities to self-direct their learning and reflection so that they could grow as teachers, we also felt an obligation to inform them directly about the examination and how their work complied with the criteria listed in the scoring rubrics. For instance, we witnessed firsthand how using evidence to support their thinking and instructional decisions was a new way of writing for teacher candidates and posed many challenges for them.

From our vantage point, edTPA demands that candidates be able to write about their instructional practices, to justify their instructional choices and decisions, and to self-evaluate and assess their teaching to show how it supports learning. Additionally, edTPA requires candidates to reflect and provide insights using specific and appropriate evidence, to identify and explain the linguistic demands of their lessons, and to analyze student work to identify both qualitative and quantitative patterns that serve as the basis for subsequent lessons. In other words, edTPA demands that teacher candidates engage with new and unfamiliar ways of reading and writing about their practices. For example, writing and using supporting evidence about their planning, teaching, and assessment practices are how candidates are evaluated on their ability to engage in the assess-plan-teach cycle. Simply put, this performance-based assessment requires that candidates write about their practice and use artifacts of practice as evidence of their enactment of the cycle. Several candidates were very skilled in writing retrospective reflective narratives about their teaching, yet when it came time to structure these reflections as academic

<table>
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<th>FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources for edTPA Implementation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The edTPA was developed by faculty and staff at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE). With more than 25 years experience in developing and implementing teacher performance assessments, the edTPA is now endorsed by the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE).</td>
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**Websites, Blogs, and Podcasts on edTPA**

**edTPA Official Website** ([http://edtpa.aacte.org](http://edtpa.aacte.org))

The edTPA is being promoted through the AACTE. The edTPA website comprehensively presents information related to the edTPA examination, from a resource library to state policies on edTPA. An interesting feature of this website is the “Voices from the Field” component, in which teacher educators and administrators from notable institutions of higher education discuss their experiences with edTPA implementation. Also included are links for learning how to score edTPA and how to download subject-specific handbooks.

**SCALE Official Website** ([https://scale.stanford.edu](https://scale.stanford.edu))

The Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity develops performance assessments for both students and teachers. The website is a useful resource for not only learning more about the edTPA examination, but also for how to create performance assessments that are aligned with the Common Core State Standards.

**At the Chalkface Blog and Podcast** ([http://atthechalkface.com](http://atthechalkface.com))

At the Chalkface is a blog and podcast that takes a more critical stance toward the edTPA and teacher performance assessments. Over the past four years, Shaun Johnson and Tom Slekar have talked with some of the foremost figures interested in US public education. Four of their most notable shows were interviews with Diane Ravitch, Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Karen Lewis, and Peter DeWitt.

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arguments in which they used evidence to support their claims, they struggled.

While we wanted to honor candidates’ strengths as writers and thinkers, we felt compelled to direct them in revising their writing to include the use of evidence from their lesson plans, video-recordings, and student work samples. That being said, we looked at edTPA as requiring candidates to engage with a particular set of literacy practices or ways of using text (Barton & Hamilton, 1998) as writers. We drew on these insights from program-wide interventions in order to re-envision our two literacy methods courses in particular.

**Revising Literacy Coursework**

Our next step was for literacy education program faculty to scrutinize coursework in order to identify the kinds of literacy practices currently required and then identify modifications needed to support candidates in developing the literacy practices demanded by edTPA. We noticed that, for the most part, teacher candidates in our literacy courses were asked to compose reflective narratives (either on themselves or learners) in which they spoke generally and retrospectively about theirs or someone else’s literacy learning. Likewise, candidates were required to create hypothetical teaching units comprised of lessons they might never have the opportunity to actually teach. We realized we wanted to modify the uses of writing to incorporate evidence-based (and arguably, more rigorous) writing practices latent within edTPA. Moving toward evidence-based writing, we believed, would give candidates an opportunity to engage in one of the literacy practices most essential for edTPA—that is, using evidence to demonstrate one’s effectiveness in planning, teaching, and assessing.

In order to ensure that candidates had exposure to collecting, generating, analyzing, interpreting, and then applying evidence to instructional decision making, we introduced new assignments that required candidates to gather evidence from observation, student work, and classroom interactions. These assignments were designed to help candidates develop the skills necessary to plan and implement instruction that is responsive to student needs.

**Journal Articles on Teacher Education Performance Assessment**


Chung reports on a study designed to understand the impact of a teacher performance assessment, the PACT in California, on outcomes for teaching. Through the presentation of two case studies of preservice teacher candidates, Chung identifies how engaging in the PACT enabled these candidates to develop essential teaching practices, such as planning a learning sequence, using assessment data to modify lessons, integrating content areas, and attending to content standards. Chung also documented how the preservice teacher candidates seemed to shift their focus from teaching activities to student learning and increase their awareness of the needs of English language learners. Chung concludes that thoughtfully implemented performance assessments are useful learning tools in professional educator preparation.


Darling-Hammond considers the present moment to be the “best of times and the worst of times” when it comes to teacher education. Her argument is that throughout the past two decades, teacher educators have worked hard to improve their programs, yet federal policies and pressures directed toward improving teacher education could easily undermine these efforts. Darling-Hammond provides an overview of the present context for teacher education, evidence of improvement in teacher education, and attacks being made on the way educators are prepared. She links the contemporary focus on teacher education to President Obama’s commitment to alleviating poverty through an integrated focus on early childhood education, health care, and schools.
As a follow up, candidates were required to select a segment of their lesson to analyze using evidence showing how they fostered and supported the students’ learning of this strategy. In using observational data to interpret one student’s learning, and thereby customizing instruction to the learner’s needs, teacher candidates were engaging with the kinds of practices they would later need to enact when completing the edTPA. Furthermore, in using observational data as evidence to support instructional decisions, teacher candidates were practicing the same kinds of evidence-based writing demanded by edTPA.

Engagement in these kinds of literacy practices continued in the follow-up literacy methods course. In this second course, program faculty decided that candidates needed to continue to engage in the plan-teach-assess cycle, while developing literacy-specific methods (besides observational field notes) for assessing student learning. The candidates were required to assess a student’s learning in their fieldwork classroom using miscue analysis, writing sample analysis, and a spelling inventory. These tasks require candidates to perform like a teacher and assess a student’s performance in the domains of comprehension, reading process, writing, and orthographic development.

The interpretations and insights cultivated through these assessments were then used to plan three interrelated literacy lessons in which candidates taught for a specific literacy strategy and scaffolded the lesson to support student learning. Also, candidates had to support their planning and teaching of these lessons through a written rationale. In this rationale, candidates were required to use evidence in two ways: 1) evidence from their assessments needed to be used to support the teaching of a particular literacy strategy; and 2) evidence from their lessons needed to be used to support the scaffolding of the instruction. This assignment is similar to Task 1 of the Elementary edTPA, in which candidates have to plan a learning segment wherein they teach a literacy strategy over the course of 3–5 lessons. As with the previous course, candidates had to video-record themselves teaching one of these three lessons and were
required to use evidence from the video-recording to analyze how their instruction helped children to learn the strategy as well as how their instruction might be modified to support learners better.

Taken together, these performance assessments engaged teacher candidates in a comprehensive plan-teach-assess cycle similar to that they would later encounter in edTPA. Likewise, in using evidence to support their instructional decisions as well as claims about learners’ strengths and areas for growth, teacher candidates were given opportunities to practice the kind of evidence-based writing associated with edTPA. Finally, in planning for and teaching customized lesson plans, candidates were gaining practice in the actual work of teachers.

Program faculty also discussed how they could better support candidates’ use of evidence to justify their instructional decision making within the context of their methods courses. To meet this challenge, faculty realized we had to take on more of a coaching role in offering feedback to learners. They decided that their written feedback on course assignments should highlight how a candidate did or did not perform well in particular areas, allowing candidates to make revisions in order to better meet the expectations. For some candidates, and in some instances, assignments went through multiple rounds of revision until the candidate had demonstrated significant ability to perform this kind of writing.

Through such intensive rounds of feedback, Amy believed that candidates learned how to use evidence to support their instructional decisions. Her beliefs were confirmed when several candidates reported similar understandings on an end-of-course self-assessment. For instance, when asked to identify the strengths she had developed in the second literacy course, one teacher candidate wrote: “[One of my strengths is] the ability to spot details in students’ work to evaluate and connect and build upon for further instruction and improvement.” Through Amy’s coaching on their writing, candidates grew stronger in writing about their teaching. Yet, this raised a question for us: does writing well about one’s teaching ensure that one will be an effective literacy teacher? Looking

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**BY THE NUMBERS!**

**545**
- The number of Teacher Educator programs using edTPA. It has been adopted in more than 34 states and the District of Columbia. (edTPA Participation Map, http://edtpa.aacte.org/state-policy)

**12**
- The number of states that have either adopted or are considering adopting statewide policies requiring a performance assessment like edTPA for initial teacher certification. These states include Washington, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Georgia, New York, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon, Illinois, and California. (edTPA State Policy FAQs, http://edtpa.aacte.org/state-policy)

**27**
- The number of different subject-specific versions of edTPA, including the fields Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Middle Childhood, Secondary, and the Performing Arts. (edTPA State Policy FAQs, http://edtpa.aacte.org/state-policy)

**1,000**
- The number of educators who helped develop, pilot, refine, and field test the edTPA. They hailed from 29 states and the District of Columbia and represented more than 450 educator preparation programs. (edTPA Overview, http://edtpa.aacte.org/about-edtpa#Overview-0)
through this lens, Amy noticed an improvement in how candidates wrote about their teaching, but she also noticed that the same candidates’ classroom practice often fell flat. One teacher candidate, when asked to identify an area for growth, wrote: “I don’t feel as confident teaching as I do writing about teaching” (emphasis in original). When Amy looked across the two sections of the course in which she was both teaching and supervising candidates’ fieldwork components, she realized that while she had many “stellar” writers about teaching, she had very few “stellar” teachers.

Another concern that was raised addressed how much teaching to the test faculty were doing. In one class, Amy was teaching candidates some of the critical vocabulary and terminology for edTPA (e.g., the distinction between “an essential literacy strategy” and a “requisite literacy skill”). A candidate asked, “Why do we need to know these particular words?” Amy found herself essentially replying, “It’s important for edTPA,” to which the student replied, “I feel like edTPA is the name of this creepy guy [i.e., Ed (first name) Teepeey (surname)] who keeps asking me out on a date and I don’t want to go out with.” As a consequence of this candidate’s concern, the candidates began to make joking statements such as “Ed, the guy nobody wants to date,” or “I’m getting ready for my big date with Ed!” Although said in jest, such expressions and sexualized framing of edTPA had resonance because they highlighted some of the problematic features of the designed edTPA intervention. These cringe-worthy words prompted Amy to pause and reflect critically on the emphasis she had been placing on the distinctions between strategy and skill instruction that is presented above indicates, Amy found herself doing more “telling” to teacher candidates. Similarly, in responding to teacher candidates’ work, she found herself “telling” them what to do instructionally, as opposed to creating opportunities for teacher candidates to arrive at instructional decisions through reflection. In short, the edTPA intensified her urge to “tell” teacher candidates what to do because it is a high-stakes assessment, linked to their teacher credentialing.

Amy was aware of providing teacher candidates with feedback that would position them well for the edTPA examination, and at times, this meant being very direct in how they should proceed instructionally. Such tension was also evidenced in the interaction around edTPA’s creeping presence. Amy was consistently reflecting upon how much edTPA should be lurking behind her instructional decisions, becoming the impetus for her curricular choices, and framing her interactions with teacher candidates. Clearly, from the candidates’ framing of “Ed TPA,” Amy was not always so effective in managing this balance.

Another tension that Amy felt herself negotiating was that between valuing their experiences, particularly their fieldwork experiences, and helping teacher candidates to reconstruct their experiences. This tension was especially exemplified in how she required teacher candidates to write evidence-based reflections on their teaching experiences. The drive to use evidence compelled teacher candidates to background their emotional and affective responses to experiences in the classroom and to foreground only those aspects of experiences that they had concrete data to support. Amy recognized how she was assisting teacher candidates to reflect in a new way, but she questioned whether the new kind of reflection came at the expense of using teacher
candidates’ personal experiences as resources for their learning to teach. As Amy works with other program faculty to address the issues that have arisen from edTPA, she continues to live these tensions with her colleagues.

Insights Gained through edTPA

From the short-term interventions made for supporting teacher candidates who were immediately impacted by edTPA, we learned the basic struggles associated with taking this exam. First, teacher candidates struggled with the comprehensive nature of the handbook and requirements of the exam. Although the handbook is explicit and provides candidates a step-by-step procedure to the exam, the extensive and detailed nature of the guide proved overwhelming to them. Second, the language of the edTPA was unfamiliar to these candidates. Although the concepts and ideas embedded in the performance-based assessment are similar to the concepts and field experiences that these teacher candidates had in their teacher education program, they came across as unfamiliar due to the language or edTPAese (Lewis & Morse, 2013). For example, teacher candidates struggled with the difference between literacy skills and essential literacy strategies (SCALE, 2013). As the definitions for literacy skills and literacy strategies are contested within literacy research (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008), coursework had exposed these teacher candidates to various definitions of these concepts. One instructor might frame summarizing a text as a literacy strategy, whereas another might frame it as a literacy skill. This lack of program-wide coherence about simple definitions of skills and strategies resulted in major confusion on the part of teacher candidates.

Furthermore, since edTPA is both new and required for certification, it placed a huge burden on our teacher candidates, producing a lot of anxiety. Most teacher candidates struggled with completion in the allotted time frame of one month; the majority took over six months to complete and submit their portfolios. In fact, as we write this article, several candidates still have not submitted their edTPA materials and, as a consequence, may not be certified to teach in time for the start of school.

We also learned that although our online support modules were considered helpful by our teacher candidates, they were underutilized, and feedback indicated that they could be more discipline specific. Thus, we are in the process of revising online materials that are specifically designed for teacher candidates in our elementary education program. We also learned that because edTPA is a time- and labor-intensive examination, we need to accommodate the process by requiring fewer assignments as part of the student teaching course. Again, we don’t want the entirety of the student teaching seminar devoted to “unpacking edTPA” (Proulx, 2014, p. 25).

As we witnessed teacher candidates struggle with aspects of the exam, we learned that we need to strengthen the articulation between course experiences and field experiences; we also need to design writing assignments across our program and methods courses that are evidenced-based. We consider such experiences to be consistent with our own beliefs about the teaching and learning of literacy, while strengthening our program in significant ways that support the growth and preparation of effective elementary literacy teachers.

The tensions and issues raised through edTPA have alerted us to some of the ambiguities in our practices (cf. Berry, 2008). We specifically have come to recognize how we, as teacher educators, are “living contradictions” (Whitehead, 1993, as cited in Berry, 2008, p. 42) in our practices. These tensions, in particular, are helping us reframe our practices so that we can continue to grow and learn as teacher educators (cf. Berry, 2008).

We are using the tensions we managed throughout this process to rethink and revise how we approach edTPA within our elementary education program.

To support candidates as they are in the process of completing edTPA, we are revising professional learning materials specifically related to the Elementary edTPA exam. We believe that over time, we will need to offer less support for this exam, as candidates will be more familiar with the requirements and will have experienced more of the supports throughout our program (rather than only during their student teaching semester when they take the exam). Our goal is to do this in a seamless way.
that highlights our own beliefs and practices about teaching literacy. Likewise, we noticed that as we have more candidates successfully pass the edTPA examination (over 80% of our teacher candidates passed the examination in Spring 2014), our own sense of confidence in our abilities to support candidates with this exam are growing. The more time we spend with the exam and its materials, the less we feel uncertain about its requirements, materials, and the “edTPAese.” As our certainty grows, we have noticed that teacher candidates’ confidence in our ability to support them also strengthens.

To support candidates in growing as teachers and not just in writing about their teaching, we are making two revisions. First, within the literacy methods coursework, program faculty decided that we need to offer candidates not just opportunities to observe and inquire into practice, but more opportunities for “approximating practice” (Grossman et al., 2009). As one teacher candidate wrote when reflecting on next steps she wants to take in her professional learning:

[My next steps are] to work on my practice and noticings [sic] in the context of real students and then take initiative in the classroom to actively apply. After I write my analyses, I would like to be given time for a follow-up, to actually apply what I analyzed.

This is where articulating the connection between coursework and fieldwork becomes even more imperative. We are exploring the structures we use for fieldwork and how we can embed fieldwork experiences within methods course meetings, so that candidates are approximating practice within a highly structured and supportive context.

Additionally, we have started to analyze the course assignments and experiences that exist across our program for how they support candidates in developing their practice. Using the high-leverage practices (TeachingWorks, 2015), program faculty mapped how course assignments enabled teacher candidates to enact these practices. This process illuminated many of the gaps in our courses, especially in terms of fostering practice, and we responded by making simple revisions to course work. For instance, we noted that across our courses, candidates never had the opportunity to receive feedback on their communication with parents or guardians (high-leverage practice #17), so we retooled an existing course assignment to include having candidates write a letter home to a learner’s parents or guardians about how the learner’s growth could be further supported at home. We also used the information we gained from mapping high-leverage practices to create a more intensive focus in the student teaching seminar course.

Finally, we are exploring how we can manage the tension between valuing their experiences in the field and reconstructing these experiences within the discourse of edTPA. Amy is exploring ways to make room for emotional and affective responses to classroom observations that are not always dependent on evidence or data. Faculty are also considering how we can bring back to our instruction teacher candidates’ thoughtful reflection on their backgrounds, identities, and experiences so that they can draw on these experiences to better understand course content. This was a feature of their instruction that faculty had abandoned in order to better accommodate the demands of edTPA.

Program faculty are seeking ways to bring more inquiry-related experiences into their methods courses, encouraging candidates to construct knowledge about teaching through inquiries into and directed observations about literacy teaching practice. We are also trying to approach the edTPA from a vantage point suggested by Jagla (2013)—that is, as an opportunity to engage teacher candidates in coursework and assignments that support reflective practice. Last, since we look at edTPA as requiring particular uses of literacy, we are exploring ways to disperse the teaching of literacy practices required for edTPA across program coursework, including content domains and foundation coursework. Doing so, we believe, will minimize “his” presence within any one course or courses, addressing the tension experienced between “telling and growing” and making edTPA appear less like a “creepy guy.”

References


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